



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION



Public Hearing – March 14, 2011
Environment Committee

Testimony Submitted by Acting Commissioner Daniel C. Esty
Department of Environmental Protection

Committee House Bill No. 5363 - AN ACT TRANSFERRING THE CONSERVATION FUNCTIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding Committee House Bill No. 5363 - AN ACT TRANSFERRING THE CONSERVATION FUNCTIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE. The Department of Environmental Protection (Department) offers the following testimony.

The Department believes the present organizational framework of the agency is a successful model, wherein the environmental quality and environmental conservation programs are consolidated in one department. Adding and not subtracting from this model – as proposed by Governor Malloy – will serve to strengthen and enhance the Department's mission of protecting public health and conserving the state's natural resources.

As currently constructed, agency integration allows the Environmental Conservation and Environmental Quality branches to work in unison on a number of environmental and recreational programmatic areas. The combined and often specialized expertise found within the two branches of the Department contributes to a more efficient and comprehensive consideration of natural resource implications associated with various permitting processes. The benefits of this collaboration are more timely decisions and creative approaches to protect natural resources, while advancing projects quickly and with greater consideration for overall public health and environmental outcomes.

Better environmental outcomes contribute to enhanced recreational opportunities statewide. The collaboration that currently exists within the Department produces tangible results such as cleaner rivers for fishing, a healthier Long Island Sound for boating, and a richer, more diverse habitat that supports recreational opportunities such as hiking, birding, hunting and biking. Under the current arrangement, the public can feel safe when visiting state beaches knowing that the water they are swimming in has been tested by staff from the Environmental Quality Branch. Additionally, anglers throughout the state have benefitted from the return of anadromous fish to a number of rivers throughout the state due to the removal of dams along these waterways. The ability to work effectively and efficiently across the branches of the Department makes all of this possible.

The bill, as proposed, will eliminate these synergies. Programmatic collaboration that has matured for nearly four decades since the creation of the Department in 1973 will be lost.

Furthermore, this proposed change will occur at a time when the state is moving in a new direction on energy policy in which the Environmental Conservation Branch will play a major role – from permitting to natural resource assessments – in advancing the state’s energy agenda. The combined resources and expertise of the reconfigured Department with an energy component will contribute to a stronger, better coordinated approach to address issues such as siting, assessment of renewable opportunities, and implementation of climate change strategies.

In addition to the programmatic overlaps that presently exist and the new possibilities that will be created under the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the Department shares a number of resources to accomplish its mission. These include centralized DEP staff that provide support to the Environmental Conservation branch for planning, engineering and construction services; information technology management that assist the Department in cataloguing and conveying natural resource information; and administrative resources such as legal and purchasing services.

Critical to the Department’s mission of protecting public health and the environment is the Department’s emergency preparedness and response capabilities. In fulfilling homeland security missions, addressing critical incidents originating from pollution-related emergencies such as oil spills and in responding to weather-related disasters, staff throughout the Department work in close partnership with each other and with sister agencies to make Connecticut a safe place to live. Department staff that routinely monitors radiological activities, for example, work in concert with the Department’s Environmental Conservation Police Officers to ensure facilities such as Millstone are safeguarded against any terrorism-related activities. Severing the Environmental Conservation Branch from the Department will diminish the overall effectiveness and interoperability of the state’s overall emergency response capabilities.

The process of acquiring open space is central to the Department’s efforts to protect natural resources, conserve critical habitats and enhance, and expand recreational opportunities throughout the state. The acquisition of open space allows the Department to add additional acreage to state parks and forests, in addition to initiatives that advance habitat protection and restoration aims – supporting a diverse array of flora and fauna. Natural resource and recreational experts within the Environmental Conservation Branch are critical to implementing the agency’s acquisition priorities. As proposed, Committee House Bill No. 5363 weakens the current linkages between these resource programs and the state’s land acquisition process.

In summary, the Department opposes proposed Committee House Bill No. 5363 because the bill does not address Governor Malloy’s goal of merging the Energy and Environment programs in Connecticut. This bill also fails to assist the Department in meeting its responsibilities to provide outdoor recreation, boating, environmental conservation police services, or hunting and fishing opportunities more safely or efficiently. Finally, if enacted, this legislation could add substantial, expensive and lengthy delays to the maintenance of facilities and negatively affect our ability to meet the needs of Connecticut’s residents, sportsmen, and tourists.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's views on this proposal. If you should require any additional information, please contact the Department's legislative liaison, Robert LaFrance, at (860) 424-3401 or Robert.LaFrance@CT.gov.

